

THE TALK

by
Clint Roswell

There are legitimate complaints that the pop format has become a technically sophisticated stretch-exercise rather than a spiralling synthesis of technique, culture and musical diversity. The inherent weakness of pop is the structural dependency on melody as its definitive element. The song will remain the same as long as the standard fare of equipment is conceptually viewed by musicians as pieces set in fixed references. Chord progressions tend to be simplistic devices for contrived permutations of melody; the bass and drum are limited to supportive roles, leaving it up to the singer for phrasings that bridge the gap between rhythm and harmony. The result is recycled formulas, fission instead of fusion and passion a poor substitute for exhilaration.

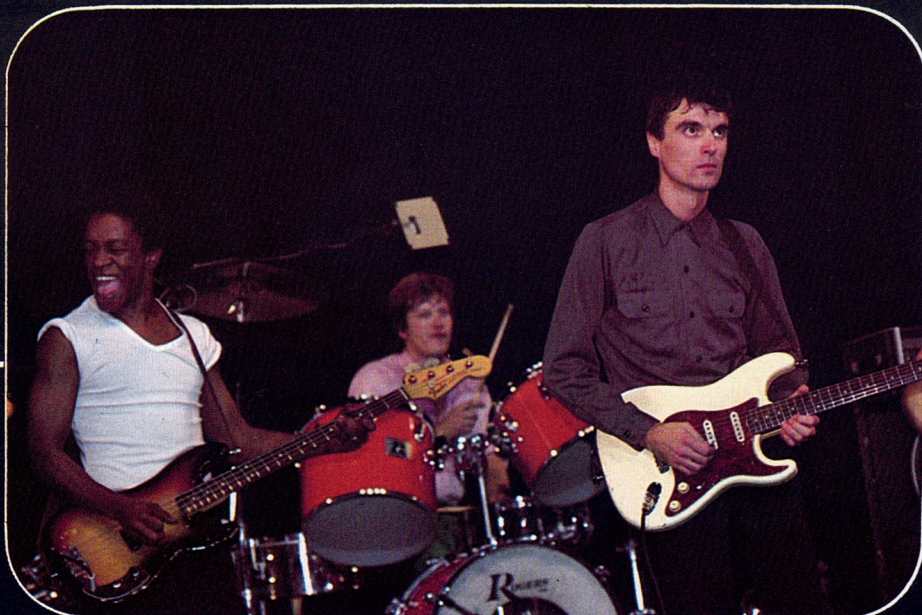
Nowhere can this be better illustrated than in the United States. Our



ING HEADS



Photos by Lynn Goldsmith



New addition Busta Jones on bass joins drummer Chris Frantz and David Byrne



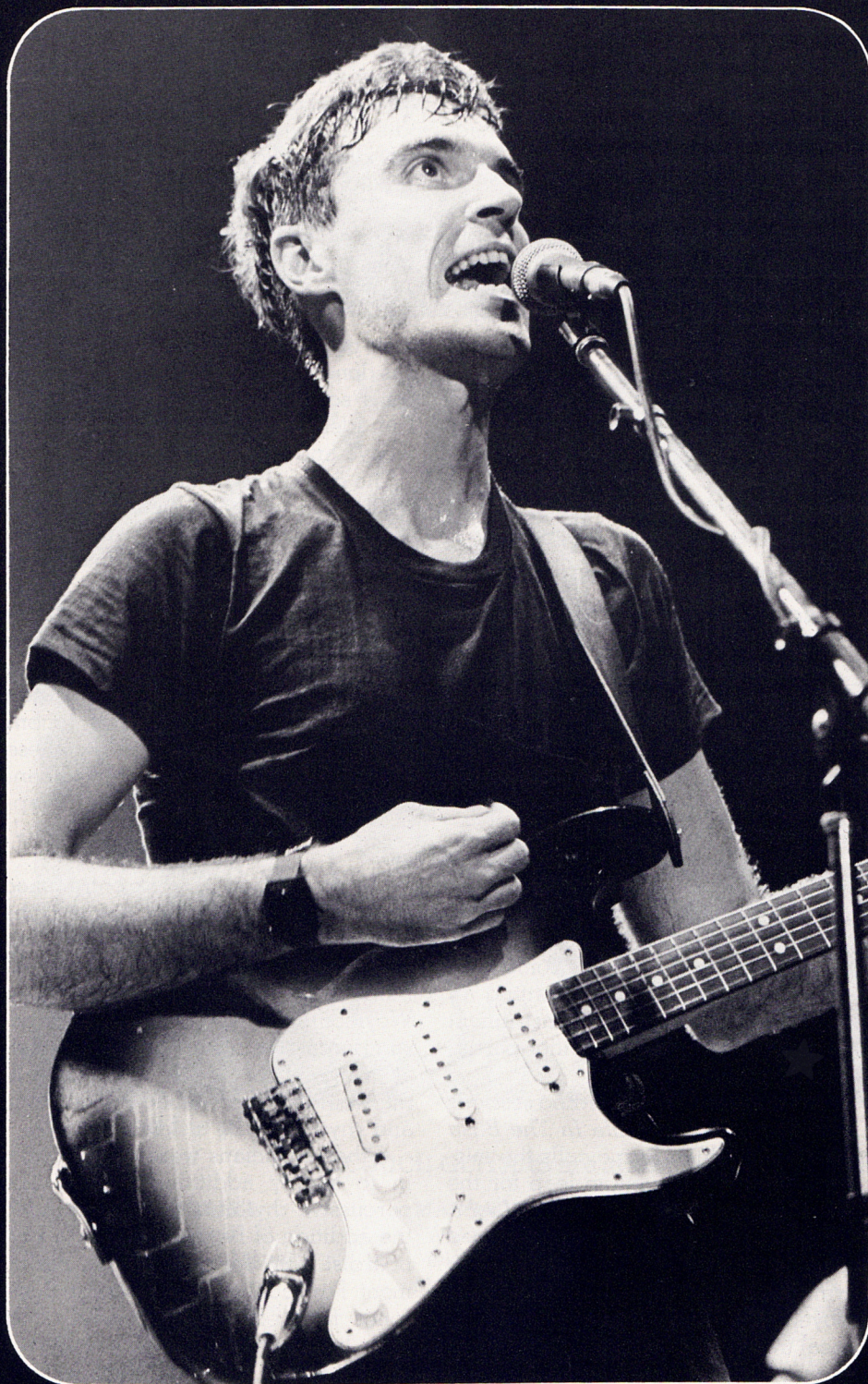
Photos by Ebet Roberts

David Byrne and Brian Eno at work in the studio.

"melting pot" of peoples has fostered a separatist attitude when it comes to music. The mainstream prevails because of self-imposed boundaries, geographical as well as racial. The music charts, for all their evil ways, are reflective of our bite-sized appetites: rhythm & blues, country & western, soul, disco, punk, bluegrass, gospel, Tex-Mex. . . .categorizations that draw the line like a picket fence.

Yet for all the polarization, the styles only offer the illusion of eclecticism. Despite a wide range of appeals, each breaks down to melodic components which share the same fundamentals of meter and harmony characteristic of Western music.

It appeared as if different forms might mesh during the social upheavals of the Sixties, but with few exceptions—most notably the British rock bands who adopted the propulsive thrust of Motown's figures and rhythms while amplifying the seminal blues of Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters—what had emerged as fiery new strivings of a frustrated generation soon lapsed back into the sterile comfort of corporate control. Big business decided quickly that combining elements of various types of music was a risky proposition. As a result, nothing venturesome happened in pop music except that computer technology made it possible for recording



engineers to produce 122-beats-per-minute of disco printouts on vinyl that spindled and mutilated the soul of James Brown. The Seventies were a cybernetic decade for recording in that most of the advances were made in regard to technology.

Like everyone else, the Talking Heads began in a garage. David Byrne, along with Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth, were former art students at Harvard who also were overwhelmed by the Seventies. Pop had become too conventional, sticking to the same derivative, risk-free format. Byrne, the founder of the Talking Heads, named in mock of the television term for a cameo closeup, was looking for a new groove—something that inspired the mind as well as the body to dance to the music.

From their early beginnings as a minimalist art-rock band, joined by a synergy of spartan chord arrangements that kindled surreal observations, the Talking Heads, completed by Jerry Harrison, were seeking to transcend the technological age with a universal statement. It was only after the triumphant fourth album, *Remain in Light*, that the Talking Heads warned us of a change that might offer a new kind of international music that would cross over all commercial lines, marrying different cultures, past and present.

"The album was really a guinea pig for some of our ideas," recalls Byrne, whose bulbous eyes stand out on a lean, clean-shaven face. "It wasn't intended to be a Talking Heads LP. I hadn't been thinking about the group as I was involved in another project. This record developed as an off-shoot of those plans.

"Actually, I didn't feel like using the same old process of writing the songs, taking them to the band and rehearsing them. I thought we should do something *exciting*."

Bored with the pop wavelength, Byrne looked for a radically different

approach. Despite the Talking Heads' critical and commercial success as one of America's most creatively ingenious bands, Byrne was prepared to stare at his Stratocaster rather than produce just an amalgam of past efforts. He abandoned the format that produced such popular anthems as "River" and "Life During Wartime;" tunes that revel in urban traumas and estrangement pulsed with an incessant dance beat. An undercurrent of tension and anxiety lurked beneath the feverish energy of their synaptic musical impulses. Byrne's vocals were punchy bursts of phrasings with hiccup-like punctuations that snapped out ripostes to razor-edged guitar strokes. Singer, songwriter, guitarist, braintrust, he has been the focal point of the band. With jet-black hair combed straight back in Valentino fashion, Byrne looked like a menacing psychotic whose deep-set eyes never appear to blink despite spurts of metronomic head-wagging. Rhythm guitarist Jerry Harrison gave the band more timbral scope and lilting dynamism when he switched to keyboards. Drummer Chris Frantz accentuated the movement with cymbal splashes and thundering runs on the tom-toms while bassist Tina Weymouth weaved a sinewy rhythm to the chord-based melodies.

But Byrne wanted a complete transformation of sound and sensibilities. The Talking Heads were no longer a fledgling group learning their way up the musical ladder. With the 1979 release of *Fear Of Music*, its third and most instrumentally sophisticated album, the band had reached a level where Byrne saw only diminishing returns. And with one-word titles like "Air," "Cities," "Heaven" and "Mind," Byrne had internalized all his observations to an extreme, bordering perhaps on an intellectual dead-end. He was not about to make music for someone else's sake.

"I wanted something that I could get excited about," says Byrne, who lives simply in an unfurnished Lower East Side New York loft because he prefers to spend his money on equipment.

Byrne decided to go outside Western spheres of reference. Despite the pervasive influence of modern black music over the rhythmic-percussive sound of the Talking Heads, Byrne had never explored the largely uncharted musical traditions of Africa. His interest developed into a project with friend and producer Brian Eno, who had recorded transmissions of a

North African radio station featuring strains of Arabic-North African pop. The music was simultaneously exotic and satisfying. Yet it contained many of the repetitive rhythmic patterns just hinted at by American funk with undulating percussions that develop into motifs and whose melodies were held together by interlocking rhythms. Voice, however, was employed often in woven choral chants as a textural means to convey a sensibility rather than to articulate feelings. Also, there were few, if any, chord changes in this format where melody arises from overlapping sets of rhythms. Byrne was further intrigued after discovering how African music interfaced with American gospel music. As Eno had recorded North African music from the radio, Byrne had recorded evangelist broadcasts he heard on the radio while driving to California to join Eno in the studio.

"We had sort of a concept, direction, and a way we felt the project

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David Byrne

should develop," recalls Byrne. From that we would go into the studio and one of us would do something and the other would do something as a recreation of that on different tracks.

"We started building until after a few things were added together it began to have some sort of an identity. We had to be coming up with new ideas and parts constantly. Sometimes a part would be based on getting an interesting sound on some instrument and that would inspire another particular part."

The result of the Byrne-Eno sessions is an LP called, *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts*, which Byrne calls the missing link in the quantum leap for the Talking Heads, *Remain In Light*. Legal problems resulting from a taped splicing of a radio transmission by evangelist Kathryn Kuhlman, employed as part of a dadaist-inspired vocal track, has indefinitely held up its release. But it was the Byrne-Eno collaboration that became the sounding

board for the Talking Heads. Byrne approached the group, cognizant of an approaching deadline with Sire Records, and the four members, plus Eno, agreed to go to Nassau for rehearsals.

"Once again, there was nothing written before we entered the studio and the rehearsals were largely done to develop skills and an attitude, not to learn songs," says Byrne. "We wanted to explore African musical concepts of interlocking and interdependent parts of rhythm that combine to make a coherent whole."

"So, all the parts were played continuously on a tape loop; there were no chord changes based on melodies as in conventional songs. The melodies would arise out of the combination of a number of interlocking parts where a few people would play together and then just roll the tape once they had the parts that meshed together. And then parts would be added to that and sometimes the original parts might be rendered obsolete. This was done until the piece had a shape—not a song yet—but a point of view. The idea being first to establish a groove and an atmosphere."

The genesis of *Remain In Light* embodies concepts of a holistic musical approach where indices of time, culture and technology become integrated parts of the process. Interlocking rhythm patterns served as the infrastructure for a multi-track recording which had been created by redubbing a series of sounds produced by a wide range of electronic instrumentation. The challenge of recreating these diverse motions of sound with authenticity was clearly a problem of approach rather than technical capability.

"In an attempt to break entrenched playing patterns," says Byrne, "the musicians would not always play their 'assigned' instruments; thus in a given number Eno and I might play basses, Weymouth play synthesizer and Harrison percussion. There were no vocals at this point, but the actual lyric writing would be determined by the mood and rhythm of the instruments."

Other musicians were also brought in to supply additional tracks. The percussive-rhythmic sound demanded the addition of Bernie Worrell, a keyboardist from the now defunct Parliament Funkadelic. Also, bassist Busta Jones fattened out Weymouth's thin bass lines, and percussionist Steven Scales added an extra dimension to

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the thrust. Three black singers, including Nona Hendryx, formerly with LaBelle, were enlisted to weave choral harmonies. Byrne, more concerned with leading a cohesive band than just playing lead guitars as in the past, also added Adrian Belew, a sessionman with David Bowie and Frank Zappa. The Talking Heads were no longer a four-member nuclear group, but a 10-piece Afro-funk unit pieced together for an orchestral sound.

Yet, for all the density of sound on the album, the musicians were restricted to virtually no embellishment, little melody and just a few chord changes.

"There are different notes, harmonics and aspects of the basic chord that change so it seems there are chord changes, but the same basic root pattern just repeats over and over," explains Byrne, "but we would mix the stuff in and out and we would create different sections."

"As a result, I had to rethink the vocal style. It would not make sense using the limited vocal melodies of the past where the music would change underneath it. The dramatic buildup would be achieved by the music. Here it had to be done by either changes in vocal arrangements or various groups of arrangements coming in or the choral arrangements on top of the vocals."

The avant-primitivism of the instrumentation is also explored in the vocals. Byrne didn't write the lyrics until after returning to New York with the rough mixes of the Nassau sessions. He experimented with the gospel cadences and phrasings he had transcribed on radio, more concerned with the sound impressions of staccato-like sermons than their actual content. They were rich in metaphor, the colorful and moving language of preachers, delivered in a way to infuse a textural spirituality to complement the music.

"The rhythms seem to interlock somehow between tribal and gospel music," says Byrne, "and what I tried to do was capture the energy and emotion of these styles without losing the spirituality. Often the melodies and arrangements implied particular spiritual attitudes and moral stances, and these gave rise to the styles of vocal phrasings, and to the lyrics."

"What keeps it all together is the groove. It works up into an ecstatic trance-state, as opposed to the medita-

tive state, and the intensity that results is joyous and completely guilt-free. Religion for the Anglo cultures is not like that. It's more of a sober experience. The gospel preachers knew there was a kind of musical presentation to what they were saying yet it still contained the spirituality that allowed their listeners to have a good time."

Seven of the eight songs on *Remain In Light* inspire a Mardi Gras type of jubilation. The music moves with a percolating Afro-funk that produces a dance pulse which shapes its own melodies. Songs like "Houses In Motion," "Cross-eyed And Painless" and "Once In A Lifetime" are a mesmerizing synthesis of rock-funk and percussive polyrhythms. Byrne tops off the choral cadences with phrasings that heighten the impact of the music. Sometimes he talks, other times he chants like a preacher, all with a sense of urgent abandon:

"Sometimes the world has a load of questions

Seems like the world knows

"In an attempt to break out of entrenched playing patterns, the musicians would not always play their 'assigned' instruments."

David Byrne

nothing at all

The world is near but it's out of reach

Some people touch it...but they can't hold on."

The Great Curve*

"Lost my shape—trying to act casual

Can't stop—I might end up in the hospital

I'm changing my shape—I feel like an accident

They're back!—To explain their experience.

Cross-eyed And Painless*

Changing shapes, momentary impulses, fluctuations and fleeting thoughts are the new concerns of Byrne. The Talking Heads are in a state of transition. They are no longer bound to fits of frenetic energy as a release for their worldly neuroses. They are undergoing a catharsis, a loosening of internalized pressures which filled their past albums with anxiety

and tension. They are not afraid of being cornered in a hostile environment. They have broken through a barrier. They have changed.

"I think it's great that a band can change directions as radically as I think we have," says Byrne. "It has given us all more of a community feeling of working together, with no single personalities being projected. You sort of lose your ego and fears."

"I was unsure about it at first, but toward the end of the rehearsals I was really pleased with the progress and I thought to myself: anybody who doesn't like this is nuts."

The litmus test for Byrne was staging the new music in concert. There was an inordinate amount of multi-tracking, overdubbing and adding new parts and sections over the original framework. The final product was a testament to precision engineering and the inspired labor of Byrne and Eno.

In August last year, the Talking Heads moved 60,000 to joyous ecstasy with a 10-piece combo which played the studio music for the first time live at the Toronto Heatwave Festival. The response was overwhelming. The Heads tried it again at New York's Central Park with greater success. The crowd walked away stunned. The excitement generated on stage was experienced by the audience. Renditions of older songs were dynamically uplifted by the new intensity. Unlike past shows, Byrne was not the frenzied center of attention, but a musician enjoying the shared experience on the crowded stage. The nationwide tour that followed shortly after the release of *Remain In Light* was embraced as perhaps the most exciting new presentation of music—any music—on the contemporary stage.

"I thought originally that adding the other musicians to play with us would make each of us take a step back, but really I had to take a step forward," says Byrne, smiling. "Someone had to be the conductor...even if just for practical purposes."

The Talking Heads changed directions in radical style only to discover it was a move that would bring them greater popularity. They achieved a multi-idiomatic wavelength. In five years, the Talking Heads have evolved from a trio, to a quartet that added producer Brian Eno as a fifth member, to its present form, a 10-piece outfit. One aspect is certain about their future. There will be more changes. And they will take them one step beyond.